

Senator Everett Dirksen: Impact on the Civil Rights Act of 1964

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Thomas Jefferson once said, “All...will bear in mind this...principle, that...the will of the majority...must be reasonable;...the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate would be oppression.” This was said before people would consider slaves people, but can be applied to today’s society. Although it took America and Illinois years to realize that skin color does not affect who a person is, it was realized. Legislators from different states stepped forward to voice their opinions, and legislators from the same places rose to oppose those opinions. Illinois itself was divided, but was mainly pro-civil rights. What it needed was a law to enforce these people’s rights. While Senator Everett Dirksen devoted himself to helping to pass laws like the New Deal, he influenced Illinoisans the most by passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Senator Dirksen made his biggest impact in Senate, but it is important to understand his origins. In 1893, when he was born in Pekin, Illinois, Pekin was conservative with few opposing views. Dirksen was a Republican his entire life. In his childhood, he loved words. Still, he decided to be a politician when he saw how Lincoln rose out of poverty and made a difference. As he graduated high school, Dirksen focused on this. He went to college and joined the Reserve Officer’s Training Corps. In 1917, America joined World War I, and Dirksen’s participation in the ROTC made him an obvious choice for a soldier. He went to war and became a second lieutenant within a year. When he returned, he launched his political career instead of returning to college.

Dirksen started by making patriotic speeches for the American Legion. This was the beginning of what would soon make him famous.

Throughout his political life, Dirksen approached situations energetically. This was shown from the beginning. He started his career in 1926 when he ran for city council. Dirksen won by a landslide. After doing his job as councilman, Dirksen ran against Congressman William Hull. Dirksen lost, but started campaigning at the end of that election year to be ready for the next opportunity. In 1932, having campaigned for several years, he won by a large margin. Being a representative of his district in Illinois suited Dirksen, and it is evident that this work was exactly what he believed the world needed.

Once he was elected to Congress, Dirksen served from 1933 to 1969. Dirksen had been preparing to be a part of the majority, but when he reached Congress, changed tactics to a minority party. He understood the need to persuade more on the level of a human being than as a party representative. This humanization made him a judicious legislator. He did, however, contradict himself on occasion. For instance, he often said that he was prepared to die for a cause, but also projected how compromise was the most important aspect of Congress. He said that no matter what, humans are born having different beliefs, and that society could only function when these beliefs are heard. Dirksen also thought that everyone was persuadable. Even today, these beliefs can be seen all over Illinois.

While in the Senate, Dirksen voted for anything he believed helped the citizens of Illinois. For example, while he did not support every aspect of the New Deal, he voted for most of its elements. This can be attributed to the fact that he had experienced the

poverty that everyone faced during the Great Depression. Also, Dirksen never accepted what he believed incorrect. This ability made it easy to see segregation as wrong. He did sometimes oppose civil rights because of the violent displays he saw for “the good of the people.” In doing this, he proved to be supportive of progress as well as understanding.

Finally, Dirksen helped pass the most monumental bill in his career: the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It forbade discrimination in public, allowed the attorney general to bring suits to the Supreme Court, allowed blacks to vote, cut off funds to discriminatory places, and created the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) to defend anyone who suffered because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was introduced to Congress, Dirksen liked it, but had problems with the titles that outlawed segregation in public and established the EEOC. These doubts played out during the longest filibuster in Senate history, which began in March. Two-thirds of the Senate needed to vote for an end to invoke cloture, but it seemed like everyone except a few Republicans were obstinate. At this point, Dirksen realized that the only way to pass the bill would be to revise it. Thus, in May, he wrote about seventy alternate amendments. Dirksen brought interested senators and lawyers and senior officials of the Justice Department to his office to rewrite the act in a passable way. This system explains why the bill passed. On June 10, 1964, Dirksen successfully shut down the fifty-seven day filibuster, using cloture for the benefit of civil rights for the first time in history. Had it not been for Dirksen’s eloquence, it might have been another twenty years before any civil rights bill was enacted. In this way, Dirksen proved his significance in Illinois history.

In conclusion, Senator Everett Dirksen spent his entire life making an impact on Illinois and America, but made the largest impression by helping pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Some find it amazing that there was debate on this issue. However, legislators not only had to get enough votes to pass the bill, but to end the longest filibuster in history. This country now knows that these rights are what make America free. "A community is only democratic when the...weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, social, and economic rights that the biggest ...possess." [Everett McKinley Dirksen, *The Education of a Senator*; Byron C. Husley, *Everett Dirksen and his Presidents*; Byron Husley, *Dirksen: Master Legislator*; "Dirksen Center," <<http://www.dirksencenter.org>> (Sept.10, 2006); Neil MacNeil, *Dirksen*; and Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Dirksen of Illinois*.]